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Politics of NBC's 'Siege'

In the world of television, the unforgettable tends to announce itself at once — before you have closed the refrigerator door or got the dog off your armchair.

So it was with "Under Siege," NBC's latest foray on the theme of terrorism as it may someday strike these United States, a theme that seems to be inspiring no end of creative activity over at the network's entertainment division.

We have, in fact, just put behind us NBC's "Hostage Flight" — about the skyjacking of a domestic flight and the vigilante evils following thereon.

But there was a difference about "Under Siege," parts of which infuriated at least one segment of the public (Arab-Americans, particularly in the community of Dearborn, Mich.) before it was shown.

They have a point. To appreciate it, we must know a bit of the plot. A

handful of terrorists set themselves the task of educating Americans in what it is "to suffer as so many Third World people have suffered so many times before."

There could be no doubt as to which nation is the prime cause of that suffering. Nor is it hard to see where we are going from here — which does not make the script, co-authored by Bob Woodward of Watergate fame, any less memorable.

The terrorists first blow up an American military base, then destroy three passenger planes in mid-flight — following which they rain rockets on the Capitol.

Throughout this carnage, through various lectures delivered by the film's hero, the FBI director, the terrorists are revealed to us as devout disciples of Islam — men who have ... but let the FBI director tell it ... "their own notion of what is worth living and dying for."

And we, the director chastises, will not understand, will not allow

these people their different ways. There is a lot more of this chastising to come, most of it from the FBI director, who must strive mightily against the agents of evil with whom the film abounds.

And who prove to be — it may perhaps come as no very great surprise — not the terrorists but the U.S. secretary of state, the president, the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the U.S. government itself.

So then what happens? The FBI director, abetted by the Iranian ambassador, who is seeking to uphold the honor of the ayatollah's government (which the American leaders have been so brutal as to accuse of terrorism), locates the terrorist leader. He is, this terrorist, found in a "safe house" in Dearborn — where some 20,000 Americans of Arab descent in fact live.

Which is the reason, roughly, for the objections raised by this community in asking NBC to delete references to Dearborn. They feared, residents attested, that such an identification might incite actual violence against them.

A reasonable enough request — except that these citizens had not counted on the peculiar hunger for authenticity prevailing over at NBC. That authenticity required that the specific Dearborn location be kept. And it provided, as well, a script featuring:

A kindly, humane, and black secretary of defense who blabs on a golf course the truth of the CIA assassination that killed the chief terrorist. This effort was undertaken at the behest of the U.S. secretary of state and approved by the president.

A U.S. secretary of state who tells the ambassador of Iran, "People in your country are barbarians."

An FBI director who chases a terrorist through streets and across railroad tracks while pleading with the suicide-to-be, "You don't have to do this."

Now here is authenticity of a high order. How, you wonder, could the talents who had set so high a standard for verisimilitude be expected to change the place name of a suburb?

There was more, of course, not soon to be forgotten: the Iranian ambassador, for example, showing up the coarseness of U.S. officials in eloquent denunciations centering on American intentions to spill blood needlessly.

(This is the same Iran whose rev-

erence for its people, under the life-cherishing Khomeini regime, we see every day in the dispatch of 12- and 13-year-olds by the thousands to be sacrificed in the war with Iraq.)

There is the president (portrayed by Hal Holbrook) of the United States sending off the assassination orders with the words, "Do what you have to." (And let us raise a plea here and now for a respite of a year at least from Hal Holbrook.)

And who finally will forget the memorable image of the terrorist tracked down in his safe house and caught, praying — a fact of which we are reminded twice? A man caught praying, understand, is a man not to be dismissed as a mere enemy: he is a man of spiritual dimensions — the sort we are intended to keep in mind even as it is borne home to us how shallow, how brutish, how utterly indifferent to justice and the rights of humankind are those who represent the leadership of the United States.

What, you want to know, is so remarkable, after all, in such familiar scenes of a work on prime-time television making just such representations about this government, just such rationalizations for terrorism and terrorists, when the prevalence of such views has been for so long the subject of the controversy raging about the media and the sorts of attitudes that so largely shape it?

Precisely that is what is remarkable — that after long months, years indeed, of self-examination and brooding, of outraged denials that there exists any particular political view shaping what comes over the airwaves, that after all that, there appears this.

It is as though we have been witness to the breakthrough of the real through the vapors, to a compulsion by which a true nature is revealed, reminding us just what it was that began the debate over politics in the media.

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